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## THE DIETARY LAWS FROM A WOMAN'S POINT OF VIEW.

MR. CLAUDE MONTEFIORE has been good enough to express a wish that I should give my ideas about his article entitled "Dr. Wiener on the Dietary Laws," which appeared in the last number of this Review, although he is aware that my opinions on this subject are diametrically opposed to his own. Conscious as I am of my inability to do justice to my side of the case, it is only with extreme reluctance that I comply with his desire. And first of all I want to say that however much I disagree with his views, and however strongly I feel their danger, I am convinced, as every one else must be, that in every word he writes he is actuated by only one motive, that of eliminating from Judaism every element that seems to him to detract from its spiritual beauty and ethical effectiveness. Although some of us may dissent from the teaching, we must all reverence the teacher; but just because he is so widely known and respected as a good and earnest man, there is reason to dread the effect his doctrine may have on others when, as in this instance, it deals a blow at what seems to me to be a vital part of Judaism.

I do not propose to concern myself here with the hygienic value of the dietary laws. Mr. Montefiore quotes medical authority in support of his denial that they possess any sanitary value whatsoever; but I do not think there would be much difficulty in adducing overwhelming expert evidence on the other side. I leave this aspect of the

question for others who are more capable of dealing with it. And here I may, perhaps, be allowed to quote the following passage from my husband's book, *The Ideal in Judaism*:—"The motive for obeying them (the Mosaic Dietary Laws) should be a *religious* motive. There is a vast difference between the self-restraint which is dictated by mere prudential considerations, and that which is imposed by reverence for a lofty ideal . . . . Every Jew who makes the distinction between the clean beast and the unclean should do so with the desire to maintain the separateness of Israel, and to maintain it through Israel's superior holiness <sup>1</sup>."

As to the influence of these laws in maintaining the separateness of Israel, a separateness which obviously must be maintained if Judaism is to survive, I think I cannot do better than again quote from the same work:—"The separateness of Israel must be assured—the Kingdom of Priests must be preserved among the congregation of humanity—by observances that differentiate it sharply from the rest of the world . . . . We would keep ourselves distinct, not because we have a contempt for our neighbours, or because we despise the world, but because such distinctiveness is the only means of ensuring the performance of our great mission. Far from condemning our fellow-men, it is the essential condition of the accomplishment of our Divinely-appointed task that we should love and respect them. Far from despising the world, we have to mingle with it in order to scatter the spiritual seed we have treasured up through the ages. Separatism is not necessarily isolation, and the Ghetto was not the Jew's handiwork . . . . If Judaism is to perform its errand it must live, and to live it must be Judaism, not vague Theism. How it is to be anything else without these distinctive laws I know not, nor do I believe any one can tell me <sup>2</sup>."

<sup>1</sup> *The Ideal in Judaism*, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

So far, then, as to the usefulness of these laws as a means of maintaining Jewish separateness. But there is a purpose more important still, and that is the promotion of Jewish holiness. It is to this point that I wish particularly to address myself. I think a woman is entitled to give her views on this aspect of the question, for it is in a woman's life, as Dr. Wiener points out, that these laws occupy so large a place. It is she who has to see that they are faithfully carried out, and indeed so much work does this duty entail upon her that Dr. Wiener declares, and Mr. Montefiore agrees with him, that one great reason why they should be given up is that they engross her thoughts to the exclusion of spiritual matters. This is the one plea that I wish most strenuously to combat. And I speak from experience, because during the first years of my married life I conscientiously carried out every detail of the Jewish dietary laws, Rabbinical as well as Mosaic. I had four sets of kitchen utensils, one set for meat, another for milk and butter, for ordinary use, and two sets for use during Passover. I made scrupulous preparation for the coming of the latter festival, in accordance with approved orthodox practice. I put the glass vessels into water for three days, and boiled all the silver plate. It now appears to me, as it will doubtless appear to most of my readers, that I was taking unnecessary trouble. About this I will not argue. All I want to point out is that my attention to all these *minutiae* did not, so far as I am aware at this moment, when I am looking back on the past from a somewhat different religious position, involve me in any spiritual loss. I firmly believe that a conscientious and self-sacrificing performance of duty makes for spirituality, whatever may be the conception that is formed of that duty. I know I shall be asked, as I have been over and over again, whether it was right to spend my time and energies merely in order to ensure that no crumb of leaven should be left in the house at Passover, or that no particle of butter should come near meat at any time. Was the

result worth all the labour that produced it? My answer is that if this were the only result achieved, it would have been far better had I spent my time in other ways. But all such efforts are but means to an end, and that end is holiness. The constant endeavour to obey laws which the Israelite considers sacred, and the self-sacrifice thus entailed, brace up his moral energies, and help him to make a more determined stand against temptation of every kind.

I submit, then, that the observance of these laws, even when carried to such excess, may do positive spiritual good rather than harm, when the motive is something higher than the mere superstitious fear which is too often the impelling force. But, so far as the *Rabbinical* ordinances are concerned, seeing that they lack the prescriptive sanctity of the Mosaic legislation, I hold that a firm conviction as to their necessity must be the condition precedent to obeying them. We Reformers, so it seems to me, have adopted the happy *via media* which Mr. Montefiore says is unknown in Germany, by teaching that the dietary laws must be obeyed as they are taught in the Pentateuch, unamplified by the dicta of the Rabbins. The adherents of those laws thus secure all the advantage of the regulation of sensual desire generally, without exposing themselves to the reproach of excessive scrupulosity. But if it should prove that in England, as Mr. Montefiore says is the case in Germany, "either people follow the entire Rabbinical code, or they eat hare as freely as they cook their chop in butter," then we should be giving a practical demonstration of the wisdom of the Rabbins in making "a fence for the Torah." But surely we ought to be strong enough to respect the Law, even when the fence is removed. And perhaps many persons who now disregard the dietary laws altogether, because they find it too difficult to obey them in the *orthodox* manner, might be willing to observe the Pentateuchal enactments if they could be made to see that those alone were binding on them. Obedience even to the

Pentateuchal precepts, which are simple when compared with the Rabbinical restrictions, still demands sustained self-sacrifice from us, and this self-sacrifice, borne cheerfully, is sufficiently great to exert a distinctly ennobling influence on our lives.

It is easy to scoff at these enactments, and to talk of a religion of pots and pans, to declare that "not that which entereth into the mouth defileth a man," and that "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit," but I firmly believe that it is just this religion of pots and pans which has helped to make Jews temperate in all things, good husbands and fathers, peaceful and orderly citizens. That these are Jewish characteristics is a fact acknowledged even by our enemies, and if they are not attributable to the influence of the dietary laws, to what cause shall we ascribe them? Our theology, it will be said, is truer, simpler, nobler, than that of other religionists. Granted; but would the belief in the Unity of God have acted as an effectual check upon the lower impulses? Is the superior theology of the Jew a sufficient explanation of the fact that he is more temperate than his neighbour? Would the Russian or Roumanian Jew, in his uncivilized environment, have remained purer and more self-denying than his fellow-countrymen, if it had not been for the benign effect of these restrictions? Other religions teach these duties merely theoretically. Judaism teaches them not only theoretically but practically also. Every day I meet among the poor with instances of self-denial from religious motives that ought to give pause to those who would throw off the "Yoke of the Law," on account of its irksomeness. I know of starving men and women who will not eat at the tables of the rich because the food is not *Kosher*; of others who refuse the most tempting dainty because to partake of it would be an infringement of the enactments about butter and meat. "All very trivial and silly," Mr. Montefiore will say; but to me it means the suppression

of desire at the call of duty, and therefore something noble and beautiful. Is it too much to affirm that men and women who impose such restraints upon themselves are in an exceptionally favourable position for struggling successfully with sensual longings generally?

I know it is sometimes urged that obedience to the dietary regulations, far from exerting this general disciplinary effect, is merely the result of a repugnance for forbidden food, fostered by early training. This may be its explanation in some cases, but it is undoubtedly true that in most instances it springs from a higher cause. Many persons feel a positive desire for certain kinds of forbidden food—a desire which they suppress entirely at the bidding of conscience.

And here I will quote a short passage from a forthcoming work on Modern Judaism by the author of *The Ideal in Judaism*. Having adduced certain considerations in support of his thesis that these dietary laws were really designed to impose a check upon sensual appetites, the writer goes on to say:—"They were to teach the Israelite self-control in all things by habituating him to self-denial in certain things. He was warned that self-indulgence could not be his rule of conduct, but that self-renunciation was the one and only basis on which it was possible to rear the fabric of the hallowed life, either for the nation or the individual. If this is to place upon these laws a higher interpretation than they will legitimately bear, I can only plead that I share my error with some of the most distinguished expounders of Judaism. The Rabbins, despite their formalism, could discern the lofty ethical purpose which linked these ritual enactments to the avowedly moral precepts of the Pentateuch. Their supreme aim was the discipline they were capable of imposing upon the Israelite's lower nature. 'The ideal Jew does not say, "I have no desire to eat swine's flesh, no desire to indulge my sensual cravings." "I desire it," he says; "but I will conquer this sinful yearning for my Heavenly Father's sake." For to

keep aloof is the true separateness, and only to such as painfully wrestle with temptation cometh the Kingdom of God!<sup>1</sup> A notable saying indeed, and one not the less notable because of its being ascribed to one of the older orders of Rabbins (Eleazar ben Azariah)."

I admit that there are hundreds who observe these laws and yet who are spiritually inert, and whose morality is far from being ideal. But what of that? No one can suppose that the avoidance of certain kinds of food can yield an entire ethical and religious equipment. Such was never their purpose, as conceived by the Mosaic lawgiver at any rate. "Obedience to the dietary regulations is never recommended as a substitute for righteousness and purity of heart, as every line of the Pentateuch testifies, nor as constituting sanctity in itself, but as a means of promoting holiness, personal, but racial more especially<sup>2</sup>." All I would maintain is that when looked at aright they are an aid, not a hindrance, to the uplifting of the soul Heavenwards. And surely we are helping to fulfil our mission of teaching holiness to the nations, we are "actively witnessing to God" when we show an example in this materialistic age of a people who cheerfully, day after day and year after year, perform acts of self-denial in obedience to the precepts of their Law. Can there be a more effectual way of keeping the torch burning that is to give light to the Gentiles, than by the sacrifice of a people's selfish longings at the behest of duty?

The social aspect of the question hardly seems to me to call for remark. Mr. Montefiore quotes Dr. Wiener's opinion that "Isolation and separation in matters of food and drink are especially calculated to make the Jews disliked and misunderstood." I cannot concur in this

<sup>1</sup> Siphra on Levit. xx. 26. A passage which proves the groundlessness of Mr. Montefiore's belief that the conception of these laws as "ascetic exercises, disciplinary rules in self-control" is "unknown to the Talmud."

<sup>2</sup> *The Ideal in Judaism*, p. 52.



view. I have always found that those Jews are sure of Christian respect who conform conscientiously to the precepts of their religion, no matter what may be the precise label, whether orthodox or reform, by which they may happen to be designated. Every man whose opinion is worth having will do homage to conscientiousness. But apart from this, how worthless is the argument that would persuade any one to disobey a single precept he considered binding, for the sake of mere social advantage ! The argument pushed to its logical conclusion would really amount to this, that Jews ought to abjure their cardinal dogma and avow a belief in the divinity of Christ in order to promote a "closer and more sympathetic union with their fellow-citizens of other creeds," for surely their rejection of his divine claim is a stronger reason for their being "disliked and misunderstood" than their refusal to eat certain kinds of food.

It seems to me, as I have already said, that the question is to be argued with reference exclusively to the power of these laws to maintain Israel's separateness and holiness. For it is obvious that the promotion of the first purpose only is not a sufficient justification for the survival of any institution. There are many Jewish quasi-religious observances which place undesirable barriers between the Jew and his neighbour. It is possible to imagine a Jewish separateness rooted in a blind and ignorant adherence to superstitious ideas. No ; holiness is the supreme object, and these dietary laws, I urge, are calculated to promote it. Jewish morality would be less stable and vigorous without them. There are a few favoured individuals—Mr. Montefiore among them—who feel the need of no such help. But mankind is made up for the most part of weak, faulty creatures, whose moral nature requires all the support it can obtain. The time will come, we all believe, when the world will be filled with the knowledge of God, when mankind will have made great strides towards perfection, and Judaism, having fulfilled her mission, need be a separate

religion no longer. But that time is still far distant, and in the meantime we must each try so to order his life as to make it lend the highest possible argument to the lives of others. We have to make "Judaism as true and pure and serviceable as we can," not certainly "by the propagation and maintenance of error," but by upholding those institutions whose gracious effect has been so abundantly illustrated in the history of our race. Only thus can we expect "God to preserve Judaism," for never does he work save through human agents.

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